

# The Book of Unknown Americans

By Cristina Henríquez

Published by Alfred A. Knopf

Reviewed by Mahfuz ul Hasib Chowdhury

Cristina Henríquez's latest novel *The Book of Unknown Americans* is a tale of diaspora, dreams and desperation. In literary terms, diaspora refers to the dispersion of people from their motherland to other countries for economic, political, religious or other reasons. Any discourse about American literature reminds us of diaspora. The exodus of millions of Europeans that emigrated from their home countries to New England (present day America) during 16th, 17th and 18th centuries in quest of peace, brotherhood and freedom has been illustrated by a broad spectrum of authors and poets of current and previous times through fictional works and verses.

The *Book of Unknown Americans* is a novel based on the lives of some Latin Americans, also known as Hispanics, living in some parts of the United States. It's a story of illusions, dismay and tenacity that mark the lives of most of the immigrants living away from their motherlands and who undergo maladjustments and different sorts of adversities while striving to make ends meet. As found in the novel, Alma, a Mexican woman migrated to America with her husband and her daughter several years back in search of a better lifestyle and more essentially, for her daughter Maribel's treatment who has been suffering from cerebral trauma since a massive car crash. Alma works as hard as she can with an utmost desperation to earn enough money to get her daughter cured. Moreover, she attends English language classes to assimilate to the English-speaking society of America but her indoor and outdoor chores make it difficult for her to keep appearing in the classroom regularly. In the meantime, Mayor, another Latin American boy falls in love with Maribel. Mayor's parents migrated from Panama to the United States and they earn their livelihood by vending sandwiches to local residents. However, Mayor's mom and dad don't entertain his romance with Maribel on the grounds of Maribel's cerebral ailment.

Some more Hispanic people have been characterized in the novel by the author. She tells the story of one man from Nicaragua and another from Guatemala who migrated to America to escape the horrors of civil wars in their countries of origin. Another man from Paraguay, who had cherished the dream of becoming a boxer for years, finally gives it up as he discovers that keeping one's body and soul together is a tough job in America being

an immigrant, let alone pursuing personal illusions. So, in America disillusionment lurks round the corner all the time as far as the troubled lives of immigrants are concerned. However, the characters in *The Book of Unknown Americans* at the end of the day take things for granted and hold back their tears and sighs of grief considering that they are lucky enough at least to be able to continue living on the soil of the United States.

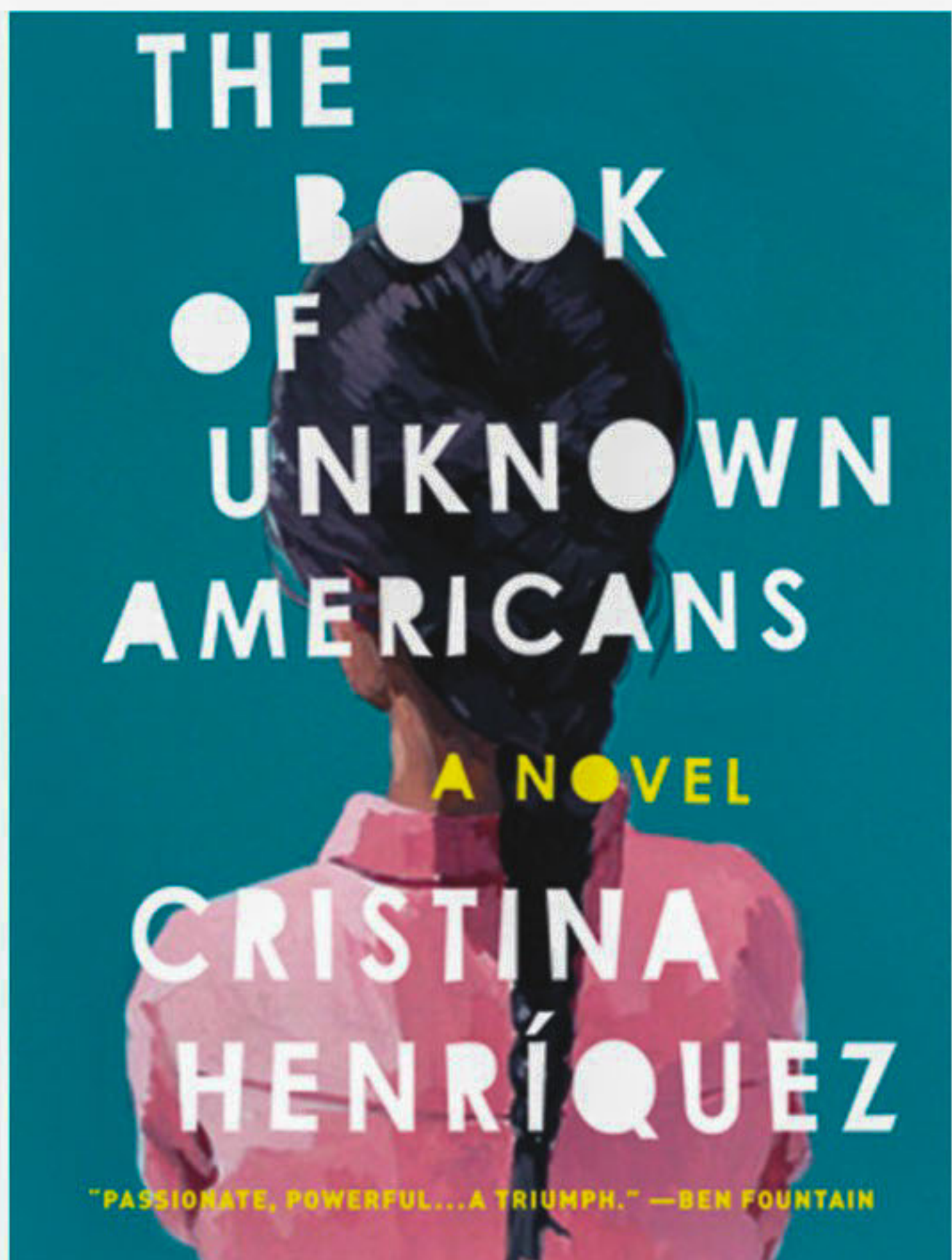
The endeavors by immigrants to adapt to the social and cultural norms of America have been addressed by some more writers. Jhumpa Lahiri, for example, portrayed the pains, pleasures and paradoxes of South Asian immigrants, Indian expatriates in particular, living in America in her books *Unaccustomed Earth*, *The Lowland* and *Interpreter of Maladies*.

The *Book of Unknown Americans* also tells the story how immigrants compromise with the dichotomies that accost their original identities while living and working overseas. Diaspora is all about saying "yes" to an onslaught of unacquainted social creeds, accepting unfamiliar and amorphous principles for the sake of survival away from home while there is no second choice.

Bonds between Hispanic immigrants have also been addressed in the novel *The Book of Unknown Americans*. They exchange suggestions, tips and guidelines among themselves which lead to an interdependent social structure among the expatriates from different Latin American nations. Such fraternity and reciprocal confidence are vital under the erratic circumstances of diaspora, the novel implies. Living alone does not solve all riddles of life. Rather life can be better lived by sharing its bleak and blithe aspects with one another under an umbrella where a lot of commonalities prevail. The novel further shows the resilience and ironbound determination of some of its characters by means of which they manage to survive through various impediments in the white-dominated American cities.

This book makes us glance once again at our individual dreams, our ancestral creeds, beliefs, traditions and all other long-preserved possessions that have made us the people we are today. That's one of the substantial points to be found in *The Book of Unknown Americans*.

The reviewer is senior lecturer, Department of English, Metropolitan University, Sylhet



# Ganamadhyam

Edited by: Muhammad Jahangir

Published by: Nabajug Prokashani, February 2015

Reviewed by Helal Uddin Ahmed

A Hefty Volume on Contemporary Mass Media in Bangladesh

The world of mass media in Bangladesh is very rich. But as in other places, it also has many challenges and opportunities. Writers experienced in this area regularly shed light on developments in the realm of mass media by publishing articles and essays in newspapers as well as through broadcasts. These write-ups and broadcasts usually prove useful for newcomers in the field as well as working journalists, students, scholars and researchers. The volume 'Ganamadhyam', edited by a veteran media personality of the country Muhammad Jahangir, has been compiled and edited based on this felt need of concerned people involved with the print and electronic media.

The compilation includes articles, interviews etc., of media personalities, writers, journalists and broadcasters on the themes of newspapers, television, radio, films and the global media. Pages 11 to 104 cover the theme of 'television', pages 105 to 256 dwell on 'news-papers', pages 257 to 278 cover radio and films, pages 279 to 302 focus on the international media, pages 303 to 330 bring forth reminiscences, and pages 331 to 415 touch on miscellaneous themes. The list of contributors is quite long and include luminaries in the field like Badruddin Umar, Hanif Sanket, Kamal Ahmed, Syed Abul Maksud, Ahmad Rafiq, Kuldip Nayar, Sakawat Ali Khan, Mizanur Rahman Khan, Ali Riaz, Shayikh Siraj, Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury, Golam Sarwar, Shahriar Kabir, Ferdous Ahmad Quraishi, Forhad Mazhar, Muhammad Zafar Iqbal, Shahedul Anam Khan, Robayet Ferdous, Ajay Dasgupta, Hamid Meer, Abed Khan, Shahjahan Mlah, Mahmudur Rahman Manna, Anisul Haque, Kamal Lohani, Sheikh Abdus Salam and the compiler himself.

This initiative is not the first of its kind by Muhammad Jahangir. He had previously edited three other similar volumes in 1991, 1992 and 1993. The editor acknowledges that he could not sustain the venture at that time mainly due to failure in getting sponsorship. Later, two other volumes were published by the Subarna Prokashani and Sraban Publishers. The present volume could be brought out largely due to the interest shown by the proprietor of Dhaka's Nabajug Prokashani, he concedes.

The editor opines that publishing this kind of compilation should have been the responsibility of the

government-run Press Institute of Bangladesh, because such publications serve the purpose of a useful reference on the contemporary mass media. He informs that he has compiled the volume through a rigorous process of screening from published materials in different media. While selecting, the compiler took into account whether the write-up would remain relevant in future, whether it was informative and thought-provoking and had reference value.

The volume brings to light many problems existing in our mass media as well as question-marks about the roles of relevant government organizations, which the compiler opines are unlikely to be resolved in the near future. Despite these difficulties, journalism in our country is quite rich. The readership is also expanding despite the fact that a small proportion of educated people read newspapers. But according to the editor, the questions of quality, objectivity and ethics continue

to haunt different segments of our mass media.

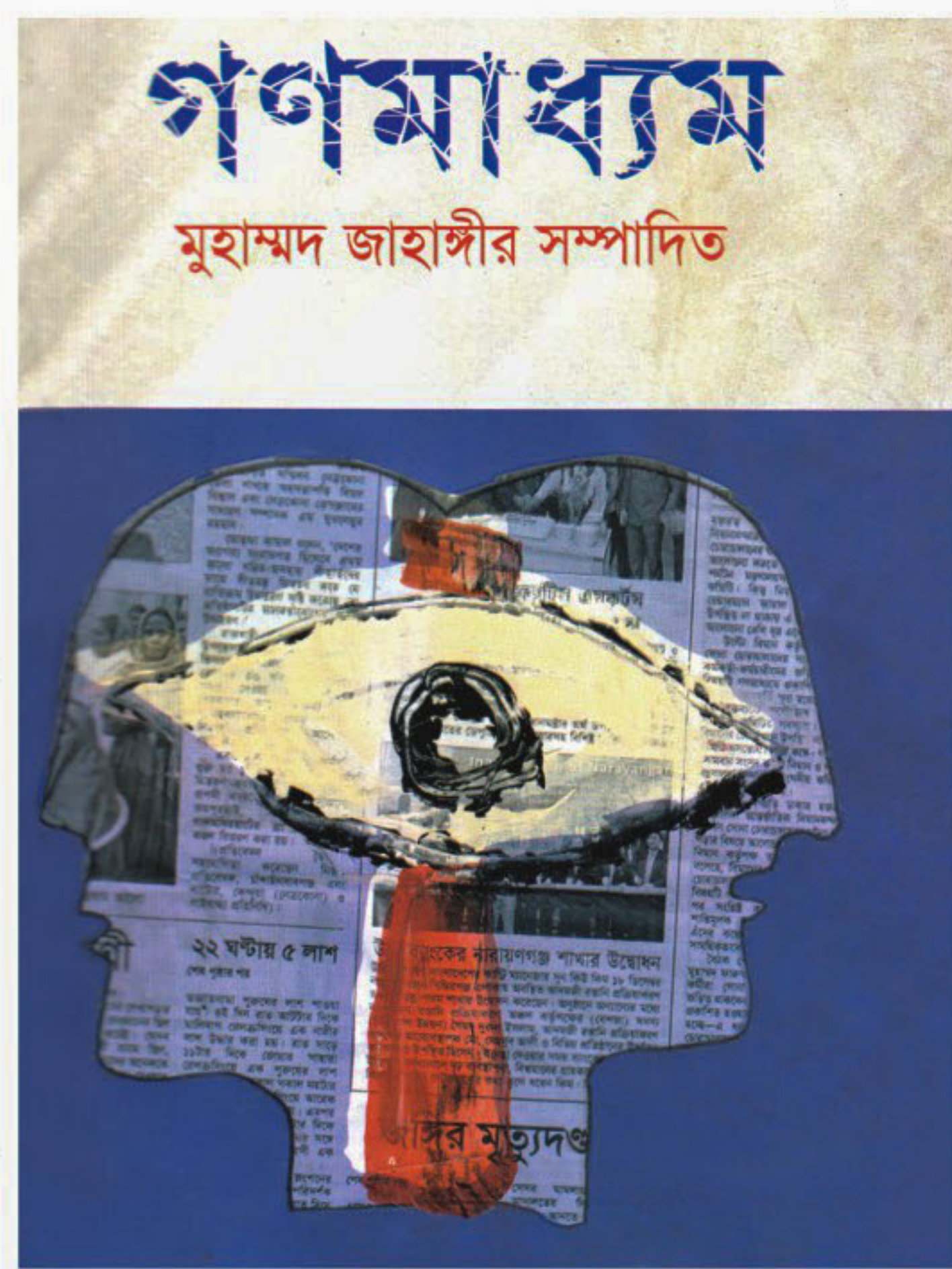
Television is now a powerful media in the country. The numbers of channels as well as their audiences have also increased significantly in recent days.

In fact, production of television programmes has now become a big business in Bangladesh. Many talented youths have become involved in this creative trade. But the compiler laments that the number of viewers watching Indian TV channels in the country outstrip those watching Bangladeshi channels, as evident from various audience surveys. He also regrets that the number of write-ups on television is quite small despite it being a powerful media. Most of these write-ups carry inter-

views of star performers as well as highlights of their programmes. Constructive and issue-based articles are found to be few and far between. The same applies to our radio and filmdom as well, although both are powerful media.

The volume 'Ganamadhyam', provides a comprehensive picture of contemporary mass media in Bangladesh and is likely to prove highly useful to the journalists, media practitioners, professionals, students, scholars, teachers and researchers engaged in different areas of the print and electronic media.

The reviewer is a senior civil servant and former editor of 'Bangladesh Quarterly'. Email: hahmed1960@gmail.com



## Classics Corner



# North and South

By Elizabeth Gaskell

Reviewed by Nazua Idris



Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell or simply known as Mrs. Gaskell was born on the 29th of September in 1810 in Chelsea. She was a British novelist and short story writer belonging to the Victorian Era. Her novel's highlight the social classes of society including the needy and therefore make them of great interest to social historians and litterateurs. Mrs. Gaskell was the first to write a biography of Charlotte Bronte that was published in the mid 1800s. Mrs. Gaskell published her first novel anonymously, *Mary Barton*, in 1848. She was best-known for her remaining novels such as, *Cranford* (1853), *North and South* (1854), and *Wives and Daughters* (1865). She gained popularity for writing ghost stories that were published in the magazine, *Household* owned by Charles Dickens. Her ghost stories are quite the contrast to her industrial fictional work and can be found in "Gothic vein".

*North and South*, a novel written by Elizabeth Gaskell, was published in 1855. The novel is set in the nineteenth century industrial Britain, in a township named Milton, similar to the manufacturing center of England, Manchester. Margaret Hale, a young woman of 19, and the daughter of a pastor, is a fashionable lady. When the novel opens, she returns to her native village after ten years, and is overjoyed with the hope of living in its fairytale-like landscape. Helstone, her village, is located in the South of England, where industrialization has not flourished that much.

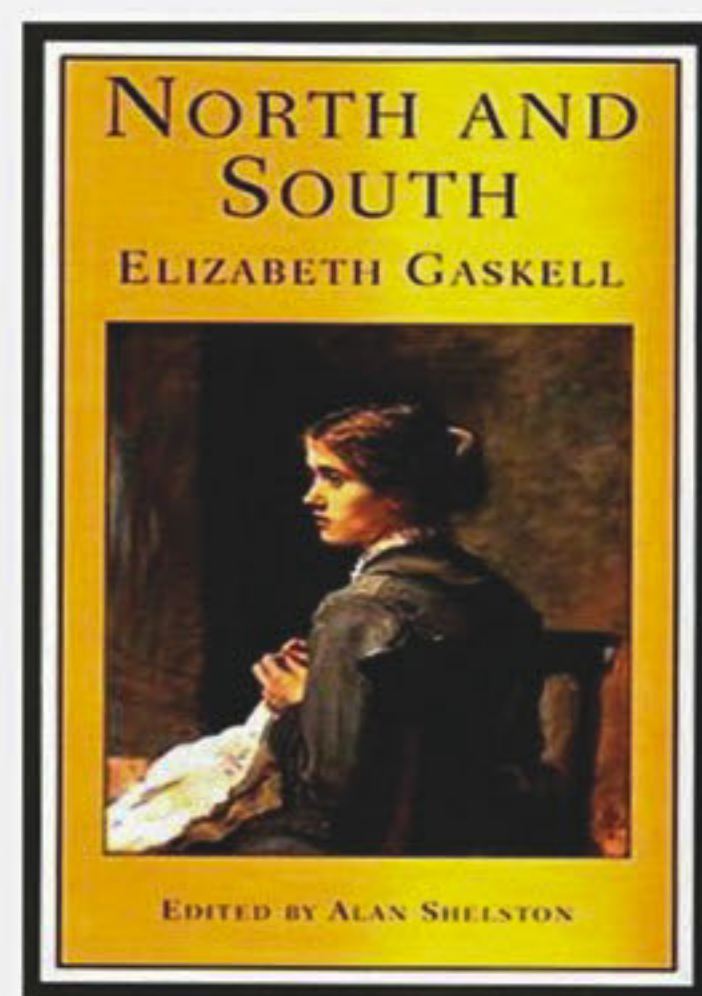
Though she is brought up in a luxurious environment at her Aunt's house in London, she has strong moral rectitude like a clergyman's daughter. To her, money invested in and made by business diminishes the dignity of people, and she even hates the idea of having a neighbor who is in trade. Henry Lennox, her cousin's brother-in-law, and a talented lawyer, proposes her. But she rejects him as she is still unprepared to accept marriage proposals, or leave the idyllic existence of Helstone. However, soon she is forced to leave her village, when her father, Mr. Hale, finds it impossible to follow the dictates of the Church of England, and decides to give up his parish, and move to Milton, located in the North of England. This news shocks his wife and daughter, as this decision will lead to an economic crisis since Mr. Hale will not get any decent job in Milton, except private tutoring.

As expected, the Hales find Milton as an antithesis to Helstone, with all its smoke, cotton dust, ruthless poverty and bleak landscape. They are

overwhelmed by the dystopic vision of the place and the thought of mingling with the nouveaux riches whose money comes from cotton-trade. John Thornton, a magnetic young cotton manufacturer and owner of Marlborough Mill, helps the family settle down in Milton. The crisis ensues when he and Margaret form a misunderstanding of each other's society. While Thornton criticizes the South for its lack of development, she criticizes the North for its lack of humanity and capitalistic pursuits. Though he is drawn towards Margaret's self-assurance and refined personality, his mother and sister are annoyed by her sense of independence.

At the beginning, the Milton people look at Margaret with surprise, mockery and suspicion because of the difference in her appearance and attire. Nevertheless, she tries to adjust herself to Milton community, and soon befriends Nicholas Higgins, and his daughter, Bessy Higgins, who works in Thornton's mill. Her prejudice against Thornton turns into hatred when Bessy and her father hold him responsible for the workers' misery, and inform her that a workers' union has been formed which will go on a strike to increase wages. In the meantime, the strikers are incensed with the news that Thornton has brought cheap workers from Ireland. They break into a mob in front of Thornton's house, and one of them throws a stone at him. However, Margaret saves him and gets hurt. Her bold act makes Thornton believe that she loves him, and the next day, he proposes her. Margaret's ego is hurt as she considers this proposal as an act of compassion, and she refuses him bluntly.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Hale's health is deteriorating, and the doctor suggests that she will not survive the trauma of living in Milton. Moreover, she is psychologically tormented by the absence of her son Frederick, who has led a mutiny against the oppressive captain of English Navy, and will be put to death if found. To console her dying mother, Margaret decides to write to Frederick. He visits the family, and Mrs. Hale dies after meeting her son. However, he is followed



by a guy named Leonards while escaping, and he and Leonards fight at the train station. At that time, Mr. Thornton sees Margaret and Frederick together and feels jealous seeing her out with a young man so late at night, and thinks the guy is her boyfriend since he is unaware about Frederick.

Few hours after this fight, Leonards dies, and a policeman comes to Margaret for query, but she denies that she has been at the train

station. The policeman discusses this incident with Thornton, but he asks the policeman to close the case, and saves her from being exposed before public. This incident makes Thornton restless, and he feels repulsive towards Margaret, while she starts appreciating him for his generosity. To her surprise, she discovers that his good opinion matters to her a lot. After a few months, Mr. Hale also dies while visiting Oxford, and Mr. Bell, his friend and Margaret's godfather, takes her responsibility. The consecutive deaths make Margaret lonelier, and she goes to London to live with her Aunt. After a few months, Mr. Bell dies and leaves her a large fortune. While she is in London, Thornton tries to improve the condition of the workers in his cotton mill. However, the previous strike makes him bankrupt. Due to moral responsibility to his investors, he does not take the risk of investing money in new business ventures and closes down his mill. Devastated, Thornton finds a ray of hope when Nicholas Higgins informs him about Frederick. Thornton understands that he has misunderstood Margaret. He visits her in London, and they confess their love to each other.

Though at first, Gaskell titled her novel as *Margaret Hale*, she changed it later into *North and South* as this title incorporates all the individual, cultural, social, economic, and geographical conflicts interwoven into the narrative texture of the novel. In terms of style, Gaskell blends the characteristics of Comedy of Manner and Social Realism to uphold the individual crisis along with the socio-economic crisis, stemming from the transformation brought by industrialization and urbanization.

She also followed the Gothic tradition in her portrayal of the sinister landscape surrounding Marlborough Mill. The novel is narrated in third person limited omniscient point of view where the focalizer is Margaret Hale. However, the novelist also includes the workers' and employers' perspectives to address the tension and crises between these classes from a vantage point. Gaskell blends the posh language used by the educated landed gentry in South with the dialects used in the Northern part of England where trade flourished. She blended two forms of local dialects for the characters of Milton - one is used by the upper class and the other by the workers.

The novel attracts the modern audience by providing an alternative view of the gender role and class distinction by blurring the gender and class boundaries. While the Victorian educated middle class women were supposed to stay at home, Margaret Hale becomes the "son" to her parents, and an investor, advisor and economic savior to Thornton. Again, the class boundary is blurred when the writer depicts Thornton taking meal with his workers, and near the end, Thornton becomes penniless, and says to Higgins that he is no longer a master. The novel also addresses various themes of individual and social importance, such as, death and spiritual awakening, psychological journey of the characters from naïveté to maturity, human relationships, industrialization, poverty, male/female relationship, family, socio-cultural transformation and so on.

The reviewer is a lecturer, Department of English, East West University